

# WASHINGTON LEGAL CLINIC FOR THE HOMELESS, INC.

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Ms. Marlene Dortch, Secretary  
Federal Communications Commission  
445 12<sup>th</sup> Street, S.W.  
Washington, DC 20554

Re: **WC Docket No. 03-109**

Dear Ms. Dortch:

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on the Universal Service Lifeline Program "one-per-household" rule. In working with clients who are homeless, it has been our experience that clients cannot access the employment, public assistance or housing resources necessary to move to a more stable and permanent living arrangement if they lack access to reliable communication services. The Lifeline program presents a significant opportunity to aid some of our most vulnerable neighbors but the one-per-household rule has had the unintended consequence of preventing people who are homeless from participating.

We are thrilled that SafeLink Wireless is testing a process in the District of Columbia for certifying shelters for the homeless as a physical location for residents to apply for participation in the Safelink Wireless program. We think this effort will help many clients escape homelessness and will prove to be a crucial component of the District of Columbia's new strategy of moving people who are homeless -- beginning with the most vulnerable -- directly into permanent supportive or other permanent affordable housing. The vast majority of our shelter beds are "low barrier" or emergency beds where individuals are not necessarily guaranteed a bed from night to night. As a result of our economic crisis, the District's shelter beds are filled to capacity almost every night with the consequence that many individuals are forced to move from shelter to shelter to find a place to come in out of the cold. The resulting challenge in simply locating clients often undermines efforts to connect those individuals to housing resources, employment opportunities or public benefit supports. Having access to an affordable cellular phone instantly overcomes those barriers.

The verification process developed by SafeLink, authorizing shelters to verify the homelessness and residency of applicants, is the right one. Under the SafeLink pilot program in the District, the Shelter provider certifies that the applicant has been a resident of the shelter, and the

applicant certifies to the shelter provider that the applicant has not applied for or received a SafeLink phone from any other shelter or provider. Many public benefits programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly known as Food Stamps) and the District's Healthcare Alliance program use essentially the same approach. It has generally proven reliable in those programs and the shelter providers understand their obligations. Completing the required application forms should not be allowed to become an overwhelming administrative burden on the already stretched nonprofit shelter providers.

In addition to addressing eligibility for shelter residents, your Public Notice raises a second critical issue:

Finally, we seek comment on whether and how ETCs that provide Lifeline-supported service to homeless individuals who do not use shelters could comply with the one-per-household rule.

Absent an affirmative resolution of this issue, many of the District's most needy residents will still be barred from participating in the Lifeline program. Because the District's shelters are so large, overcrowded and sometimes unsafe, many residents choose to stay outside, sleeping in cars, abandoned buildings or wherever else they can find some protection from the weather. These individuals are probably the ones who would benefit the most from access to an affordable cellular telephone.

In the past year, there have been a series of attacks on individuals while they were sleeping outside. Tragically, one gentleman was killed. The ability to summon police with a cell phone could be literally life saving for someone living outside.

As mentioned above, the District has shifted its strategy for serving individuals and families who are homeless to a "housing first" approach. Rather than require clients to go through shelters and transitional programs to prove they are "worthy" of receiving permanent housing, the District is trying to move people directly into housing. In other jurisdictions, this approach has proven to be more effective in helping clients move toward self-sufficiency and is in fact more cost-effective than the traditional continuum of care approach. The District is implementing its program by beginning with those individuals and families with the highest score on a vulnerability index. Many of these severely disabled, elderly or otherwise vulnerable people are living outside in various parts of the city. If the case workers who are charged with moving eligible clients into housing could

communicate with those clients by cell phone, rather than having to literally search the streets for them, the process would be exponentially more efficient and more individuals would be served.

The Obama administration has committed to ending homelessness among veterans. A number of initiatives are being rolled out in the District, including an expanded Veterans Administration Supportive Housing program, that will operate much like the housing first program described above. Again, if outreach workers could provide a telephone to the veterans they are working with, it would help overcome countless barriers to the veteran receiving needed services.

The process for including individuals and families that are homeless in the Lifeline program would probably be much like that approved for individuals who stay in shelters. Instead of shelters certifying the residency of applicants and accepting delivery of the telephones through the mail, day programs and outreach programs that serve this population could perform that function. Those agencies work hard at developing relationships with the people they serve and would be best positioned to ensure the legitimacy of applications from individuals who live outside.

Again, we thank you for the opportunity to comment on the "one-per-household" rule and would welcome the opportunity to work with you to develop procedures that would permit access to individuals and families who could benefit most from affordable cellular telephone service.

Sincerely,



Patty Fugere, Executive Director



R. Scott McNeilly, Staff Attorney

cc: Wesley Heppler  
President  
Board of Directors